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ABSTRACT

Schools can change and become more effective in teaching the basic skills to all students, and states can help them. After 15 years of studying change in local school districts, researchers have identified a number of promising strategies for managing schools, training staff, providing technical assistance and developing new materials. Some of the findings show: (1) the school must be the focal point for planning, organizing, and carrying out an improvement program; (2) the principal is a key figure and must have teacher commitment and central office support; and (3) technical assistance from state agencies and consultants outside the district can be very helpful. A list of things to do to improve schools is provided for state leaders, superintendents, and principals. (JW)

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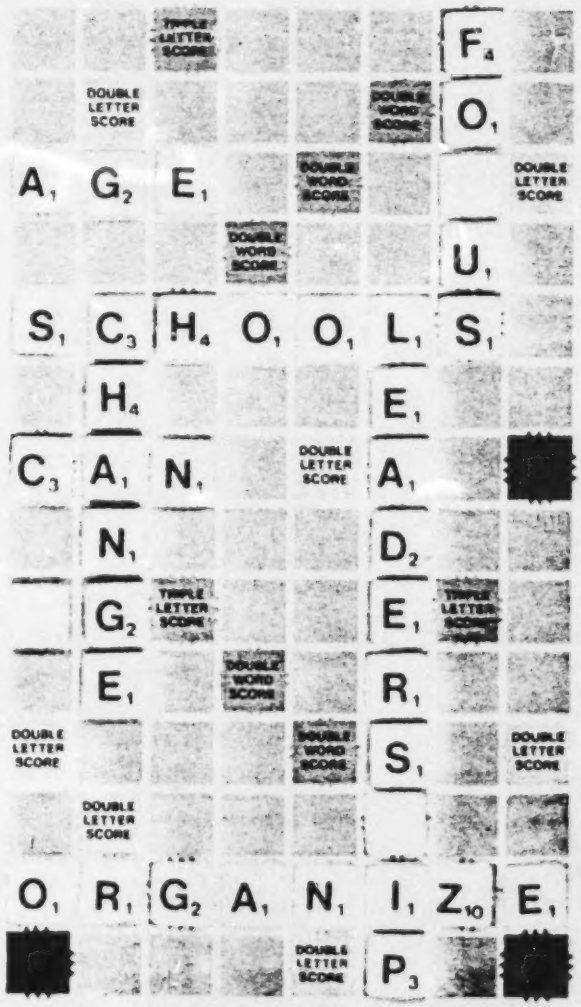
Schools *Can* Improve
Local Strategies Need State Backing

by Allan Odden, director, Education Programs Division, ECS.



Schools *can* change, and states can help them do it. They can become more effective in teaching the basic skills to all students. After 15 years of studying change in local school districts, researchers have identified a number of promising strategies for managing schools, training staff, providing technical assistance and developing new materials. Different actors — teachers, principals, superintendents and chief state school officers — and different levels of the education system — the school, the local district and the state — play different roles in this process and have different impacts.

Each School Counts

The *school is the focal unit* for education improvement. This is perhaps the most fundamental finding from research in program implementation, effective schools, school improvement and program evaluations. School climates that are characterized by a focus on the basic skills; collaborative planning among teachers; instructional leadership from principals; and order, discipline and a sense of efficacy on the part of both students and teachers are associated with the most effective schools. Whether the interest is in improving basic skills, carrying out effective desegregation programs or providing special services for the educationally disadvantaged, the handicapped or students with a language other than English, the school must be the focal point for planning, organizing, developing the staff and carrying out an improvement program.

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Principal Is Key

Successful schools and teaching staffs are characterized by a great deal of collaboration in working toward clearly defined missions and purposes for their schools. Bringing about this behavior is a complex task, and it is *the* function of the principal.

As the person in charge of the school, the principal must provide the instructional leadership, either personally or through selecting and supporting other school leaders. He or she must command knowledge of: (1) teaching and learning, i.e., effective teaching research; (2) staff development practices based on effective teaching research; and (3) the dynamics of organizational change, i.e., what actions are most likely to make change easier or more difficult for various groups of people. In addition, effective instructional leadership requires the management skills needed to: (1) set the strategic goals that foster a schoolwide focus on basic skills; and (2) allocate resources, organize the school and make administrative decisions in ways that promote conditions for effective classroom teaching.

Effective schools are run by principals who know what is happening in the school and who are actively leading the effort to provide quality education. They provide both the psychological and logistical support that teachers need to carry out their part of the program. Principals who are committed to school improvement programs; who take the lead in establishing clear goals and procedures; who communicate well with their staffs; and who *give teachers major control over the details of the process* are most successful in improving their schools.

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To Improve Schools

State Leader

1. Set statewide goals for achievement in the basic skills.
2. Add school-level planning to accreditation requirements.
3. Add knowledge of the effective teaching research to teacher certification requirements.
4. Adjust administrator certification requirements to include the sets of expertise needed by building level instructional leaders.
5. Eliminate program rules, regulations and fiscal requirements that impede school-level coordination of all programs.
6. Expand the state department staff assigned to technical assistance for local schools.
7. Develop statewide research networks for disseminating training manuals and classroom materials useful for school improvement programs.

Superintendent

1. Set clear districtwide goals for achievement in the basic skills.
2. Show active leadership for a school improvement program and convey understanding of the difficulties involved.
3. Focus planning and action on individual schools.
4. Select principals with the knowledge and managerial skills needed to be school-level instructional leaders.
5. Create programs that train principals in the skills needed to be instructional leaders and train teachers in effective teaching and classroom managerial skills.
6. Allocate funds for central office staff to work with teachers over the long term on the details of improvement.

Principal

1. Set clear goals for student achievement in the basic skills.
2. Be an active leader in improving the school's instructional program.
3. Be open with teachers and interact often with them.
4. Allow teachers to maintain control over the day-to-day details of instruction.
5. Develop staff training programs, train teachers to be the trainers and allocate time for the programs.
6. Develop, organize, coordinate and manage an integrated and coordinated school curriculum, with articulation across both programs and grades.
7. Organize school activities and class periods to increase student time on task.

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Teacher Commitment

Teachers must be committed to the principal's vision and plan if the program is to succeed. Often they must change their attitudes and behaviors before they can change their directions. But if they believe they control and influence the day-to-day operation of a school improvement program, change and commitment will come easier for them. *Without this critically important element — teacher commitment — the success levels of school improvement programs are dramatically lowered.*

Collaborative planning and good collegial relationships among teachers are also important ingredients. Change involves resocialization; interaction is a major basis for social learning. If teachers exchange ideas, support and positive feelings about their work and are not isolated in their classrooms, they are much more likely to adopt new approaches and learn new skills.

Sustained staff development programs are important for creating this interactive pattern among teachers. Moreover, teachers learn best from each other, so teachers trained to be staff developers tend to be the most effective. The rich new knowledge coming from effective teaching research provides ample content for practical, high quality training materials and manuals.

Central Office Support

The central office of local school districts also can contribute concretely and significantly to a school improvement effort. In fact, new programs should be attempted *only* when there is central office commitment to provide the necessary leadership, resource assistance and follow-through. While individual teachers or schools *can* implement some level of education improvement on their own, sustaining a *major* school improvement effort requires solid support and a strong degree of central administrative authority from the superintendent and his or her staff. Just as the principal sets the strategic directions for a school, the central office must set clearly the strategic directions for the district, and target district resources — people and money — toward those directions. To generate and maintain support in schools and classrooms the central staff must show that they understand the realities of implementing a school improvement program and visibly assist in the process itself. Specific central district office actions can enhance the school improvement process:

1. The central office can see to it that newly hired principals are well grounded in the conceptual and managerial skills needed for effective instructional leadership. If principals are not selected with these criteria in mind, the key element for leadership at each school is likely to be missing.
2. The central office can offer training in the knowledge and techniques needed for school improvement to principals already at schools.
3. The central administration can see to it that money is allocated in ways most likely to contribute to school improvement programs' success.

Recent school improvement research shows that central office curriculum staff play crucial roles in increasing and maintaining teacher commitment to school-based change efforts. They can provide specific training to teachers, provide materials suitable for the problems being addressed, help solve unique problems and lend continuing technical and psychological support. This kind of long-term, specific help enhances teacher belief and commitment, which in turn leads to wider and better use of school improvement techniques.

The central office also can collect data and organize useful information. The key here is to collect individual student data in areas directly related to the instructional program, and to make that data available immediately to the school and the teachers.

Finally, astute district superintendents develop school improvement programs that "fit" with the social, political and fiscal norms of the community. If there is a history of parent involvement, a school improvement program should have parent involvement. If resources are short, the program should reflect creative uses of existing resources. If there is a tradition of strong leadership from the state capital and state education department, a local school improvement program should reflect that as well. The point here is that when local community tastes, norms and preferences are respected, the program has the greatest chance for success.

States Can Help

Another important finding from recent research is that technical assistance from outside the district can be very helpful. While the preceding has shown that teachers, principals, central administration staff and superintendents play the most direct roles, people outside the district can also play effective roles.

First, state agencies can take the knowledge and materials from research and translate them into useful materials and activities for

teachers, principals, superintendents and state program and policy staff. It cannot be assumed that research knowledge will easily find its way to the right people at the right time. And it is inefficient for each of the 16,000 school districts in the country to engage in such translation exercises themselves.

Second, recent research shows that consultants external to local school districts are helpful, and sometimes vital, to the school improvement process. They can link people to other school districts or to resources available across the country, provide direct technical assistance to the district in its special efforts or train staff in a variety of skills.

External technical assistance can often help people improve their problem solving processes so they become less and less dependent on outsiders. In those technical assistance activities that include developing local capacity for problem solving, the long-term impact on the district is broader and the costs, both for the district and the state, are less because the district is able to do more on its own.

When local community tastes, norms and preferences are respected, the program has the greatest chance for success.

There are other helpful roles people and agencies outside the local district can play, all documented by research efforts in recent years.

The short-term problem, however, is that much of this helpful technical assistance has been provided by state education departments using set-aside funds from a number of federal categorical programs, such as Title IV-C of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or desegregation technical assistance centers. All of these efforts are jeopardized by recent federal budget cuts and the fiscal straits in most of the states. Yet it is precisely these low cost, high gain programs that are needed when resources are short. And the times make maintaining these state technical assistance strategies a critical leadership task of state policy makers.

Much is known about how to implement change at the local level in order to increase the success of local school improvement programs. While knowledge is still expanding in this area, we know enough to forge ahead and expect positive results. This knowledge, together with the major gains made in the techniques of teaching and managing classrooms, supports an optimistic view of the prospects for school improvement in the basic skills in the eighties. ★